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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 JAKARTA 004464

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TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [AS](#) [ID](#)
SUBJECT: AUSTRALIAN ASYLUM GRANT TO PAPUANS SPARKS SHARP
WORDS AND CRUDE CARTOONS

REF: CANBERRA 455

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Classified By: Political Officer John Rath. Reason: 1.4 (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: The Australian Government's March 23 decision to grant three-year "protection visas" to 42 Indonesian nationals from troubled Papua province has provoked condemnation from the GOI and the Indonesian public. The GOI recalled its ambassador from Canberra, postponed a bilateral cooperation project, and began revisiting other assistance agreements. Indonesian President Yudhoyono has spoken publicly against the GOA's decision to grant asylum, but he has not stoked public anger. Indonesian politicians and public figures have denounced the Australian action, warning that it may signal active Australian support for the Papuan separatist movement and invoking memories of Australia's role in facilitating East Timor independence. The Papuan asylum flap spawned a pair of dueling Indonesian and Australian cartoons, each depicting the other's leader in a vulgar sexual position. Indonesian-Australian ties have long been prone to stress and strain: media windbags and nationalistic demagogues will likely keep the Papuan asylum issue alive for some time longer, particularly if unconfirmed media reports of additional Papuan asylum-seekers in Australia prove accurate. End Summary.

Sharp and Sometimes Shrill Indonesian Reaction

¶2. (C) The GOI reacted sharply to the Papuan visa issuance by recalling its ambassador from Canberra and stating publicly that it would review all aspects of Indonesian-Australian relations. Last week, the GOI abruptly postponed a signing ceremony of a bilateral MOU for a USD 10 million Australian project to fight avian influenza, and Australian Embassy officials here told us they expect similar postponements of other assistance projects in the coming days. Visits to Australia by high-level GOI officials have also been put on ice to register Indonesian pique, and GOI representatives were noticeably absent from a memorial ceremony held to honor Australian military crew who died last year in a helicopter crash while aiding Indonesian earthquake victims in Sumatra. Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) has expressed public disappointment over the visa issuance and questioned the degree of Australian respect for Indonesia's sovereignty and territorial integrity, stating that the GOI would not tolerate separatists or those who support them.

¶3. (C) SBY also said publicly that bilateral differences

should be handled through discussion and dialogue, a pointed rejoinder to demands from agitated Indonesian politicians and some public elements for a severance of diplomatic relations.

Australian Embassy Political Counselor Justin Lee told us SBY had assured the Australians that while he wants to "manage" Indonesian reaction to the Papuan asylum issues, he must also make some concessions to placate public anger. Although SBY maintains that he wants no long-term damage to Indonesian-Australian ties, Lee opined that the Papua issue is an emotional one for Yudhoyono due to his background in the Indonesian Armed Forces and its overriding ethos of national and territorial unity.

¶4. (U) On April 5, SBY visited Merauke in Papua, the far southeastern corner of the nation and part of the famous "Sabang to Merauke" nationalist jingo (the rough equivalent to our "sea to shining sea" verse), an important symbol of Indonesia's pan-archipelagic territorial integrity. According to media reports, SBY took the occasion to warn against foreign interference, stating "the problems in Papua are a domestic affair. We don't want any foreign party to meddle in domestic issues." SBY characterized Australia's decision on the 42 Papuans as "incorrect, unrealistic and unilateral."

East Timor Replay?

¶5. (C) The Papuan asylum issue has drawn criticism from all quarters of the Indonesian body politic. Parliamentarians from the opposition Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P) have been particularly vocal in their denunciation of Australian actions and of SBY's alleged diffident handling of the matter. For instance, Megawati Sukarnoputri's former spokesman and current legislator Sutradara Ginting claimed that Australia's unilateral decision underscored contempt for

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Indonesian sovereignty and a lack of personal respect for Yudhoyono, who had previously sought to personalize improved Indonesian-Australian ties through high-profile interaction with Australian Prime Minister John Howard. Ginting and other legislators invoked memories of Australia's role in East Timor's independence from Indonesia and warned that the Australian visa issuance matter may be a prelude to similar intervention on behalf of Papuan separatists. The legislature's Foreign Affairs Committee invited Australian diplomats to clarify the Papuan asylum case, a meeting Australian Political Counselor Lee termed "difficult". Lee said that he explained that Australian asylum law is based on international conventions, but that the Indonesian legislators nonetheless urged the Australians to change their law.

¶6. (C) Lee went on to acknowledge that an additional reason for Indonesian suspicion of Australian motives is the presence of Papuan NGOs in Australia. Lee did not rule out the possibility that the arrival of Papuan refugees was a stunt to grab attention for the cause of Papuan independence, noting that their boat was flying the separatist "Morning Star" flag and that NGOs seemed to have advance knowledge of their arrival.

Crude Caricatures Caught in Carnal Knowledge

¶7. (SBU) The most bizarre aspect of the Papuan asylum fall-out has been a pair of dueling cartoons published in Indonesian and Australian newspapers that have contributed to bilateral tension. Jakarta-based daily "Rakyat Merdeka" started the cartoon tiff March 28 with a lurid front-page cartoon under the title "The Adventure of Two Dingo" (sic) that depicted the likenesses of Prime Minister Howard and Foreign Minister Alexander Downer as a bespectacled pair of copulating wild dogs. An Australian flag dangled from the extended tail of the Howard dingo with a dialogue box that

reads "I want Papua!! Alex, try to make a play for it!"

18. (SBU) Not to be outdone, Australian newspaper "The Australian" responded several days later with a crude cartoon of its own. Bearing the title "No Offence Intended," the cartoon showed a grinning and fez-hatted likeness of Indonesian President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (SBY) engaged in non-consensual carnal knowledge with the likeness of a visibly distraught Papuan male wearing a bone through his nose, and a dialogue box that has the SBY character saying "Don't take this the wrong way." Both SBY and Howard have criticized the vulgar nature of the cartoons, though Yudhoyono watered down his remarks by opining that the "Two Dingo" artist was likely driven by wounded feelings of national pride, and Howard reportedly went out of his way to defend press freedom. Anecdotal soundings among ordinary Indonesians reveals that many distinguish between the level of vulgarity represented by the two cartoons and somehow find the Australian cartoon to be more offensive because, as we have been informed, Indonesians expect a higher level of conduct from Australians than themselves and "The Australian" is a more serious newspaper than a sensationalist rag like "Rakyat Merdeka."

Comment

19. (C) Beyond the bluff and chummy character of previous SBY-Howard meetings and their photo op declarations of a new era in Indonesian-Australian relations, the Papuan visa flap and attendant dueling cartoons point up an awkward and often strained bilateral relationship. According to a common Indonesian public perception, bilateral ties are complicated by Australian fear of its poor but gargantuan neighbor and tinged with an Australian lack of respect/sense of superiority that is often perceived to have racist overtones, though that perception may change due to the large and growing number of Indonesians who study in Australia. The uproar over the Papuan asylum grant and the cartoons is in some ways reminiscent of the hubbub that surrounded recent high-profile drug smuggling prosecutions of Australian defendants in Bali which often seemed more in line with athletic contests between bitter rivals than with courtroom trials, complete with boorish media blowhards from each country accusing the other in print of various collective ills, evils, and shortcomings. The same Indonesian media rabble-rousers - along with local politicians eager to wrap

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themselves in the flag or take a notch out of SBY - will continue to flog the Papuan visa story for some time to come. This will only intensify if media accounts are accurate that an additional boatload of asylum-seeking Papuans has washed ashore in Australia. As evidenced by the statements of some Indonesian politicians, many Indonesians still see Australia as the arch villain behind the independence of East Timor and will continue to view with deep suspicion its actions regarding Papua.

PASCOE